

## Book Review: Mietzner, M. (Ed.) (2013). The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia: Conflict and Leadership

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## Book Review: Mietzner, M. (Ed.) (2013). The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia: Conflict and Leadership.

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Since the early twenty-first century, some Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Thailand and Timor-Leste) have witnessed the political resurgence of militaries, especially military involvement in political institutions, economy, security, and society. The most significant case might be the Thai military coup in 2006. More research in the field of military resurgence is called for to extend the debate on the civil-military relations. *The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia* is a timely exploration of the impact of militaries on politics in different geographical contexts and exposes the tensions and interconnections in civil-military relations in Southeast Asian countries.

The contributors to this wide-ranging volume stem from an array of disciplines, including history, political science, security studies, and Southeast Asian studies. In their opinion, the multifaceted aspects of the militaries' political resurgence are ignored by structuralist approaches to a large extent, such as specific ideology (i.e., communism or democracy), regime types (i.e., monarchy, military junta, or one-party state), historical background (i.e., independence through armed struggle, negotiated transition into nationhood, or absence of colonial rule), and economic development.

The volume features eight chapters. Chapter 1 illustrates the literature of military resurgence in Southeast Asia and outlines the book's content. Based on case studies of seven Southeast Asian countries (i.e., Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Singapore), Chapters 2 to 8 reveal the causes of military resurgence – failed civilian governance and the problematic leadership of paramount leaders determine the civil-military relations. In the case of Thailand, the struggle for democracy finally caused a vicious circle, “which in turn is used by the military to justify its coercive and political role in restoring order” (p. 59).

At the same time, the militaries show less respect for the citizenry and turn to strengthen “corporate identity and coherence” (p. 54), that is, fractionalization. In the case of the Philippines, since the current institutions are unable to handle the security issues and political conflicts, the military withdraws “its loyalty from a popularly elected chief executive” (p. 101) and enjoys more autonomy and political status to a large extent. In contrast, the Singaporean military “lacks the socio-political significance” (p. 164) and there is no obvious change in Singapore's civil-military relations, given that the civilian government in Singapore has remained stable since the 1960s.

The contributors also point out that the military dominance has its own limits. For example, there is increasing tension between high-ranking ex-officers and the new generation of officers, the newly established units, as well as the military. In the case of Timor-Leste, the rise of specialized paramilitary police units has threatened the advantages of the military.

The most significant chapter of this volume might be Chapter 2 entitled “The Armed Force of Burma”. As Marcus Mietzner suggests, “with the exception of Burma, Southeast Asian civil-military relations after 2001 have been shaped by the successes and failures of civilian governments” (p. 18). In the case of Myanmar, in addition to the variables of “failed civilian governance” and “problematic leadership of paramount leaders” (p. 19), another essential variable should be taken into account, that is, the long-term existence of ethnic-based militias, which makes the civil-military relation in Myanmar the most complicated in Southeast Asia.

Historically, most ethnic-based militias in Myanmar have established their own autonomous regions, some of which enjoy full autonomy in internal administration, while others have a semi-autonomous status. This weakens the Myanmar central government’s authority to a large extent. At the same time, the conversational tactics of the paramount leaders have caused a vicious circle: The *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) uses force to occupy the areas under the ethnic-based militias’ control, but none of the major ethnic-based militias has ever been entirely defeated. It is not surprising that the armed conflicts have lasted so many years in Myanmar, and the successes and failures of civilian governments had little impact on the *Tatmadaw*. By contrast, the rise and fall of ethnic-based militias have had more direct impact on the resurgence of the *Tatmadaw*. Indeed, insecurity caused by the tensions between militaries and ethnic-based militias is also one of the main reasons for military resurgence in Southeast Asia.

In Chapter 2, the *Tatmadaw* is considered to control the natural resources and the national economy. In fact, the dominance of the *Tatmadaw* has been exaggerated to some extent. For instance, the *Tatmadaw* is unable to implement and enforce rules in parts of Myanmar, especially in the border areas controlled by the ethnic-based militias. As a result, the *Tatmadaw* has lost control of a large portion of natural resources, such as precious gems, timber, and minerals in Kachin and Shan states, where ethnic-based militias are very active. As a consequence, there are frequent low-intensity armed conflicts between the *Tatmadaw* and ethnic-based militias. Moreover, the *Tatmadaw* cannot mobilize manpower from the entire nation, because the ethnic-based militias compete against the military over manpower resources. As a result, both the *Tatmadaw* and ethnic-based militias are suspected of recruiting child soldiers. It would be valuable for the editor and contributors to this volume to continue research on military resurgence and civil-military relations in Southeast Asia. If possible, it might be better to consider ethnic-based militias as a variable in military resurgence, which might make their arguments more inclusive.

From a context-sensitive perspective, *The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia* addresses the militaries’ political influences in Southeast Asian countries and explores the tensions between civil-military relations and military resurgence. In short, this edited volume of essays provides a solid foundation for further

research on civil-military relations in Southeast Asia. It may be particularly valuable for academics, policy makers, and students seeking alternative perspectives on military resurgence and civil-military relations in Southeast Asia. At the same time, this volume will surely raise awareness of the importance of studying military resurgence in Southeast Asia and stimulate future discussion in academia and policy-making circles.

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